



**Roland Leikauf.** *"Welcome to My Bunker": Vietnamkriegserfahrung im Internet.* Bielefeld: Transcript —Verlag für Kommunikation, Kultur und soziale Praxis, 2016. 470 S., zahlr. Abb. (broschiert), ISBN 978-3-8376-3342-9.

**Reviewed by** Frank Usbeck

**Published on** H-Soz-u-Kult (January, 2017)

## R. Leikauf: »Welcome to My Bunker«

In *»Welcome to My Bunker«* Roland Leikauf brings forward a fascinating work on US Vietnam veterans' representations of war experience. His investigation of veterans' websites interweaves approaches in cultural history, folklore studies as well as memory and trauma studies. Expanding earlier scholarship on the commemoration of war and on the tradition of first-hand war narratives to include these websites and online networks, the author draws our attention to a new medium within the large and complex corpus of research on Vietnam. More generally, he alerts historians to the potential and limitations of online media as they are about to become critical primary sources in future research on cultural, social, and media history.

Leikauf's work posits that Vietnam veterans take charge of a new technological opportunity in an act of empowerment to make their voices heard. Yet, he finds that they also join earlier narratives (published in traditional media) in adhering to and further promoting the generalizing cultural myth that soldiers' collective experience was marked by ignorance, neglect, and open rejection at the hand of US civil society upon return from the war (p. 14). The websites employ the revolutionary technology of the Internet to break through the perceived isolation and to avoid dependency on publishers. However, the veterans' primary interest in retaining control over their representation of experience and memory inherently restrains their own gestures of outreach: Leikauf convincingly explains that veterans construct their websites as *»bunkers,«* as ambivalent virtual spaces of mem-

ory negotiation that invite the public to first-hand information about the war but also build a line of defense to shield the veterans' memory and identity constructions from criticism and from diverging interpretations of the past, i.e. from a loss of control over the narrative. Veterans *»are virtually circling their wagons«* (p. 340) on these websites because *»[t]he eternal role of the ostracized and marginalized [is] primarily a manifestation of anxiety — the veterans' anxiety about losing their unique role and sense of «specialness»* (p. 404). My translations.

The book firmly places its source corpus in the tradition of US war narratives, contextualizing it with films, novels, and memoirs related to Vietnam and earlier wars. The author's diligent research offers a comprehensive overview of personal, first-hand online representations of Vietnam, resulting in a corpus of some 660 websites, in addition to a variety of weblogs and collaborative sites focusing on unit histories. In this, *»Welcome to my Bunker«* further expands the extensive literature on the cultural history of Vietnam. Its methodological integration of memory studies, trauma theory, and narratology echoes the currently popular academic interest in veterans' first-hand narratives, especially in US cultural and literary studies.

Leikauf's historical focus, his German academic perspective and context add a unique voice to this diverse body of Vietnam scholarship. Evolved from a dissertation thesis in a German history environment that *»in terms of disciplinary interests, traditions, and method-*

ologies often tends to be more conservative than its US counterpart, the book must exert a considerable effort to justify its unorthodox and integrated approach as a history project, both in its temporal scope, its multidisciplinary methodology, and regarding the validity of online media as historical sources. Its mélange of folklore studies, oral history, and cultural and media history is a combination that US historians seem to have been more comfortable with so far than many of their German colleagues.

It is, thus, a major accomplishment of Leikauf that his work extensively scrutinizes Vietnam veterans' websites for their value as historical sources, especially regarding their immediacy and their seemingly unfiltered access to lower-echelon soldiers' perspectives. At the same time, Leikauf elucidates problems of historical research in online media such as the instability of data (e.g., sites constantly being edited, or suddenly taken offline), authenticity (e.g., difficulties in ascertaining authorship and rights), selection and comparison criteria for a complex source corpus, and the potential and complications of hypertext. This primer to historical research in new media will be of interest for many scholars in recent history and points to future problems in historical research as far as online sources are concerned.

At a few moments, the book's diverse disciplinary interests and transnational perspective lend themselves to overgeneralization, e.g., when Leikauf rightfully criticizes the currently widespread pathologization of veterans' experience with regard to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in US popular culture and literary trauma theory but does so by invoking studies on German soldiers in World War Two and contextualizing concrete US Vietnam veterans' experience with that of the Wehrmacht (e.g., pp. 33, 336). S nke Neitzel / Harald Welzer, *Soldaten: Protokolle vom K mpfen, T ten und Sterben*, Frankfurt 2011, cf. Erik Stiegmann's review, in: *H-Soz-Kult*, 22.07.2011 <http://www.hsozkult.de/publicationreview/id/rezbuecher-16563> (13.12.2016). Generally, the book neglects a few debates and aspects of (Vietnam) war experience and personal narratives currently driving the academic discussion in literary and cultural studies but it would be unfair to accuse the project of missing out here given

its multidisciplinary but, nevertheless, history-oriented focus.

Leikauf structures his work into five major segments: Part One details its methodology and discusses relevant academic approaches in memory studies, oral history, trauma theory, and veteran studies. Part Two introduces the cultural history and historiography of the Vietnam War, its discourses, contexts, myths, and leitmotifs as well as prevalent sources and literary genres in which Vietnam War experience has been expressed. Part Three engages the veterans' websites as historical sources. Leikauf retraces his systematic research and offers a succinct source evaluation. He also outlines how the various authors construct a virtual narrative community (pp. 133-135) that is influenced by cultural memories and imaginations of Vietnam and, rather than reflecting diverse, individual experiences, further promotes a narrowed, US-centric, primarily male, combat infantry perspective of the war. Part Four, some 160 pages, comprises the bulk of the study. The author here details practices of commemoration (e.g., online memorials as part of a virtual sepulchral culture p. 200), and develops a typology of content categories on the websites (e.g., various aspects of war experience, people, spaces, homecoming, and post-war meaning-making strategies). The final part ends the book in an elaborate conclusion. Leikauf once more emphasizes that suffering is a central element in the veterans' identity construction as victims. This self-victimization is driven by recurrent references to painful experience and, at the same time, does not allow the veterans to come to terms with their experience through writing because their suffering and the public representation thereof has become a distinctive and, thus, cherished element of Vietnam veteran identity (p. 334).

*Welcome to my Bunker* is a noteworthy contribution to academic debates on the Vietnam War and on war experience and commemoration in general. It will be of interest not only to historians but also to scholars in cultural and (new) media studies. It would be worth publishing in an English-language edition to increase its visibility in the large Anglo-Saxon scholarly networks on war experience and war narratives.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/>

**Citation:** Frank Usbeck. Review of Leikauf, Roland, *"Welcome to My Bunker": Vietnamkriegserfahrung im Internet*.

H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. January, 2017.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=48944>

Copyright © 2017 by H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved. This work may be copied and redistributed for non-commercial, educational purposes, if permission is granted by the author and usage right holders. For permission please contact H-SOZ-U-KULT@H-NET.MSU.EDU.